

Conference Paper

The Culture of Appearance As a Component of Children Model of Culturnost in Soviet Russia (1934–1939)

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Abstract

The article uses 1934–1939 publications of the *Pionerskaya pravda* newspaper to analyze the children's model of *kul'turnost'*. Exploring the demands to the schoolchildren's appearance, the authors note that these demands were based on ideological and hygienic, and not on aesthetic, criteria. We come to the conclusion that the 1930s children model of *kul'turnost'* corresponded to the adult model in its general features; however, it was marked by higher stability, because the children audience was instructed to follow the first basic level of *kul'turnost'*.

Keywords: Soviet culture; *kul'turnost'*; models of *kul'turnost'*; embodiment; young pioneers; *Pionerskaya pravda*.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, various aspects of Soviet culture and *kul'turnost'* of Soviet population have been actively researched in Russian and foreign humanities (See 1; 4; 5; 6; 8). However, most of the available research focuses on the adult population: peasants, urban residents and the new Soviet elite. But the demand to be cultured was also applied children – a phenomenon, which has not yet attracted focused attention of researchers specializing in 1930s Soviet culture.

We believe that tracing how the model of *kul'turnost'* was translated for the children's (in particular, young pioneers') audience is an important research project. How was the children's *kul'turnost'* constructed? What values and norms it was based upon? What types of behavior were promoted as part of the Soviet state's policy regarding children? Since the scope of this task stretches far beyond the limits of this article, here we focus on one aspect of *kul'turnost'* only: the norms of outward appearance promoted in children's culture.

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For this purpose, we use the materials published in *Pionerskaya pravda*, the All-Union newspaper for pioneers and schoolchildren. This newspaper perfumed “not only educational tasks, but also what can be termed symbolization and visible presentation of the regime” [5, p. 10]: it both translated official ideas and ideological demands and reflected the everyday life of Soviet children.

2. Methods

Methodologically our research is based on the ideas of V. Volkov and S. Fitzpatrick regarding acquisition of culture by Soviet citizens.

In his article “The concept of *kul'turnost'* in 1935–1938: Soviet civilization and the everyday life in Stalin's era” V. V. Volkov convincingly demonstrates that the goal of “becoming cultured (*kul'turnyi*)” was one of the imperatives in the everyday life of Soviet citizens in 1930s. *Kul'turnost'* itself, despite its conceptual variability in different periods, always presupposed acquisition of good manners, culture of speech, culture of appearance (neatness), gallantry in interpersonal communication (especially with the girls) and other expressions of “etiquette behavior” [8].

In this respect, it is also methodologically interesting to apply the S. Fitzpatrick's concept of the three levels of culture “that people throughout the Soviet Union were busy mastering” [1, p. 80]. The first level is the culture of personal hygiene and basic literacy. The second level of culture includes basic manners (table manners, behavior in public spaces, treatment of women etc.) and the basics of communist ideology. The third level includes the sphere which S. Fitzpatrick named the “culture of propriety” (good manners, culture of speech, appropriate clothes) and the knowledge of high culture. According to S. Fitzpatrick, each social group was prescribed to acquire a corresponding level.

Empirically this research is based on the materials of *Pionerskaya pravda* newspaper published in 1934–1939 (1046 issues in total). The choice of the time frame is based on the existing data on the *kul'turnost'* discourse among adult population (according to V. V. Volkov, active discussions of this theme appear in 1934 and abate by 1939) and is chosen for the purpose of comparisons between adult and children *kul'turnost'*.

3. Discussion

The formation of a new Soviet man was the guiding notion of the cultural project unfolding during this time period. At the same time, as V. V. Volkov justifiably remarks,

“*kul'turnost'* was never a clearly defined concept, no party or governmental leader provided recipes how to become cultured” [8, p.209]. This idea is shared by S. Plaggenborg: “A unified state-accepted and precisely calculated cultural plan never existed neither in thoughts, nor in practice” [5, p. 322]. Only the most general principal approaches were established.

Pionerskaya pravda expanded and elaborated the scope of issues regarding young pioneers' behavior in various situations. However, its focus was only on two components of *kul'turnost'* (decorum): the culture of social interaction and the culture of outward appearance. The third component – the culture of need gratification (including table manners) – was almost never addressed.

In the newspaper issues of 1934–1939 the culture of appearance features from time to time in various sections: in satirical topical pieces (feuilletons), letters from the readers and full-featured articles. Some of them discuss concrete examples, others provide general discussions of how a young pioneer should look like. But all of them are connected by the two interconnected principles underpinning this model of *kul'turnost'*: hygiene and ideological loyalty.

The elements of human appearance have always served as status markers. Clothes, hairstyles and accessories have served as signs and symbols and often not only pointed to an individual's place in a social hierarchy but expressed his/her political or moral stance. On a societal level, clothes served as signs allowing to distinguish between “us” and “them”. It was this opposition that governed the development of the ideas on an appearance of a Soviet citizen. The “right” clothes are the clothes that preclude any possibility of being mistaken for a foreign spy or an “alien social element”. Additionally, the model of *kul'turnost'* as it applied to appearance was a part of new “Soviet kallokagathia” that assumed the union of physical beauty and moral perfection of a Soviet citizen.

An important characteristic of a new Soviet person was his/her cleanliness directly connected with hygiene. Hygiene was a manifestation of pragmatic utilitarian considerations and was grounded in concrete circumstances of daily life. The majority of families lived in shared houses, temporary buildings (*barak*), communal apartments and houses-communes, where opportunities to satisfy primary needs were limited and even ascetic: “overcrowding, lack of water, broken sewer system...” [4, p. 95] blighted “shared use... of necessary hygienic attributes of normal life...” [4, p. 79].

The lack of proper conditions often provoked negligence regarding even basic personal hygiene. Therefore, one of the lines of effort in a pioneer's group was an organized work on hygiene and education. Every group chose a sanitary assistant out

of its ranks, whose task was to check every morning the clearness of their comrades' ears, hair, hands, and the neatness of their clothes. Personal hygiene became a matter of collective concern and social control.

Beauty was also interpreted not so much as an aesthetic notion but as a laboring one – that is, as a result of conscious efforts and discipline. Accordingly, a Soviet person's appearance should have expressed not his or her “taste” – a purely “bourgeois” concept – but a systematic and tireless self-improvement. O. Vainshtein states that the main demands of the Soviet etiquette regarding clothes were “modesty”, “simplicity” and “moderation” [See: 7].

The issues of appearance were also raised in the “Letters from readers” section of the newspaper, which published children's letters on concrete question. Among these questions were: “Can a schoolchild wear his hair long?”, “Why are there no mirrors in our school?”, “Can you wear a pioneer tie with any dress?”, “Can the 8th-grade girls wear high heels?”, “Why do we wash hands?” and so on. The answers provided by the editors are based not on the ideals of beauty or aesthetic attraction but on the utilitarian ideas of hygiene, cleanliness and neatness as the preconditions of health and productive labor. For example, the answer provided to the question about high heels was as follows: “High heels deform children's feet, the body becomes unstable, less nimble... Deformed by such shoes, the feet will hinder your future ability to become a full-fledged laborer at a bench, on the machine, to become a good athlete, ice-skater, parachute jumper or steadfast fighter...” [3, p. 3].

Satirical pieces (*feuilletons*) were another popular rubric that raised the issues of appearance. This genre presupposed critical, often comical or satirical angle. The plots of these short satirical stories about the life of young pioneers (schoolchildren) varied, but the moral was ultimately the same: the promotion of neatness, cleanliness, hygiene, precision and responsible attitude to one's duties.

An interesting example of such *feuilleton* is *Gofre-plisse* (1938). Its heroine wears a blue dress that provokes universal admiration: “all pleated, full of twirls and bows”; she smells of perfume, and her shoes are always shining. But during the evening dance she loses a shoe, and everybody can see “a torn stocking and fingers sticking out with long fingernails black with dirt” [2, p.1].

This story also has an obvious moralizing subtext that warns the readers: under an excessively beautiful and smart dress can be lurking a “dirty” (in every sense) body. The initial admiration of beauty turns into its condemnation. While delivering an obligatory propaganda of cleanliness, this text also draws the line between neatness as a norm and an excessive attention to one's appearance as a certain deviation pointing to moral

inadequacy (even in the beginning of the feuilletons it is noted that the blue dress's owner "to everybody, even to teachers... talked condescendingly, and it always seemed as if she was looking at you from somewhere high above").

The examples provided here lead us to the proposition that acquisition of basic hygiene (the first level of culture in S. Fitzpatrick's classification) was considered both necessary and sufficient level of *kul'turnost'* for the schoolchildren.

Personal cleanliness and neatness were closely connected to the idea of social order and served as "the markers of self-discipline and an efficient organization of labor" [8, p. 210]. Therefore, during the 1930s the mass education of the population in the norms of bodily cleanliness, household and personal hygiene served as a disciplining practice both regarding adult and children population, with the goal to decrease the amount of negative social deviations.

At the same time, the processes of hygienic cleaning correlated with the societal goal of ideological cleansing, elimination of everything in the new society that was old, useless, petty-bourgeois. The ideologeme of cleansing dominated the new social morality. Therefore cleanliness, neatness and hygiene among the young pioneers represented an important integral part not only of the concept of *kul'turnost'*, but also of political and ideological education.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed the children model of *kul'turnost'* applied to the culture of appearance, as it was presented in *Pionerskaya pravda* newspaper. This model, on the one hand, corresponded with the societal goals of the period; on the other, it was somewhat different from the adult model. The differences are as follows. In terms of the culture of appearance, children were required to comply only with the first level of *kul'turnost'* (in S. Fitzpatrick's classification) – that is, basic hygiene. Moreover, any interest pioneers may have shown in the higher levels (for example, fashion) were discouraged. Also, in 1934-1936 the development of adult model of *kul'turnost'* followed rehabilitation of some bourgeois and petty-bourgeois norms (cozy home, beautiful clothes, good table manners etc.), which led to the growing suspicion against and rejection of these features in 1938–1939. Analysis of *Pionerskaya pravda* publications demonstrates that in school environment, among the young pioneers, the attitude to *kul'turnost'* during this period was more or less stable. This stability was probably conditioned precisely by the fact that such *kul'turnost'* never extended to the higher levels and continued to exist at the intersection of hygienic and ideological

demands. In any case, it showed continuity with the adult model of *kul'turnost'* being based on the same norms, values and ideolemes.

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